Using Conjoint Methodology to Address Textbook Needs: A Case of Iranian EFL Context

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ABSTRACT

The common approach to textbook needs analysis is using questionnaires in which every item focuses on one clear-cut segment of textbook attributes. However, arguing that isolated items may not be of much value, this study employs conjoint methodology which, as a human behavioral model, simulates all possible combinations of attributes and their accompanying levels to predict the needs for the potential textbook at college level. Accordingly, the researcher invited 450 students and teachers to assign a preference score to 32 profile cards, each assessing the importance of 7 attributes and their accompanying levels based on a scale from 1 to 7. Then the responses underwent conjoint analysis. The results obtained are especially valuable for three groups: for textbook market analysts who might consider using this methodology in their future investigations and for the authors and publishers who might use the findings in planning and publishing books for this research context.

Keywords: Conjoint Analysis, Conjoint Methodology, Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Market Driven, Product Driven, Textbook Attributes

INTRODUCTION

The English language book market is flooded with books of different types and subjects which support all levels of teaching and learning. In addition, foreign language learners and teachers can mainly develop by good textbooks (Razmjoo, 2007), and publishers can only survive by publishing successful books (Briles, Briles, Frishman, & Kremer, 2011).

Consequently, due to the importance of the role of textbooks during academic programs on one hand, and the enormous size of their consumers on the other, it is of utmost importance for the authors and publishers to have clear understanding of the attributes which are likely to attract more buyers, and hence higher purchase. But what are the attributes which guarantee success for the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) audience? The question can be tackled two ways (Browne, 2010): (1) Product driven, in which the author seeks to develop materials based on personal beliefs and individual ideas, and (2) Market driven, where the publisher identifies market needs and tries to develop profile of market gaps. This study is more interested in the latter approach.

The common practice is that authors and publishers begin with questions they ask consumers about their new book to find out

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whether or not their customers would like the book if they published it. However, opponents (Louviere, Hensher, & Swait, 2000) argue that relying on this kind of questionnaire alone may not be appropriate for the accurate identification of consumer preferences, because each question asks about just one attribute at a time and ignores the fact that the attributes are made up of levels, and each individual may exhibit various degrees of preference in each attribute and level if combined. The alternative then has to be a tool which takes all the possible combinations of those attributes and levels into account and is able to generate multiple numbers of profiles which are slightly different in each of the attributes defined. It is proposed that by using a conjoint methodology we can design a framework consisting of profiles capable of describing various ranges of features present in a product (Louviere et al., 2000). Therefore, unlike common market research questionnaires which involve a degree of uncertainty, the realistic context of simulations and the complex behaviors they produce has made this approach an ideal candidate for our research purpose.

To the best of our knowledge, conjoint methodology has never been used before in textbook market needs analysis. Therefore, this study is the first attempt to use this methodology to empirically investigate EFL market preferences for textbooks at academic level. To do so, the researcher used the full-profile conjoint analysis (also known as full-concept) approach to measure users’ preferences of textbooks.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the importance of textbooks for college students and teachers in Iran, as well as the ways in which textbooks enter the Iranian academic market. The following section describes the methodology and procedures for the development of our conjoint model. The fourth section presents the results of the conjoint study. And finally, the last section offers conclusions and discusses the reasons for the findings, and implications of this study.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Textbooks are very important in the life of college teachers and students because first, they are employed for various purposes, and second their cost is one of the major expenses during the college years. Riazi and Mossalanejad (2010: 52) underscore the importance of textbooks and maintain: “Textbooks play a very crucial role in the realm of language teaching and learning and are considered the next important factor in the Second/Foreign language classroom after the teacher.” In the same vein, McKeachie (2002) goes even further and states that “the major predictor of what students learn is not the teaching method but the textbook” (p. 14).

Therefore, the weight given to the textbooks makes their selection a critical decision for the students and teachers, and their supply a great opportunity for the authors and publishers. McGrath (2001) suggests there are three basic methods through which teachers select textbooks: (a) The “Impressionistic” method which relies on a general impression gained by reading the blurb and the contents page, and the skimming to get a sense of organization, topics, layout and visuals; (b) The “checklist” method which requires certain criteria on a list be systematically checked off in a certain order; and (c) The “in-depth” method which suggests a careful examination of the representative features such as the design of one particular unit or exercise, or the treatment of particular language elements.

Having examined the Iranian teachers’ preferred method in choosing textbooks at university level, Hassaskhah and Saleh (2012) reported that the teachers in their study, in most cases, followed the impressionistic method and made almost zero reference to the other two approaches when it came to choosing textbooks from among the options available in the market.

To seek explanations for this observation, it is needed to have a picture of the present textbook market of this research context.
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